



3 Analysing prose

Objectives

- To establish a strategy for approaching unseen prose texts
- To practise close reading of prose texts
- To look at examples of commentaries on prose texts

Analysing prose is not so very different from analysing poetry. In both you have to look at literary techniques, at choice of language, imagery, structure and so on, but these may be used in different ways to achieve different effects in prose. You may have to read even more carefully when studying prose passages as the techniques used may not be so readily detected.

Most of the prose passages you will be asked to analyse will be extracts from longer pieces of work, rather than complete texts, although occasionally very short essays or stories are set which are complete.

When writing your commentary on a prose text you will need to examine closely the writer's style in order to analyse the way the language is used. You will need to be aware of the features to look for and the ways in which the author's choice of style can influence meaning and effect.

Examining writers' styles

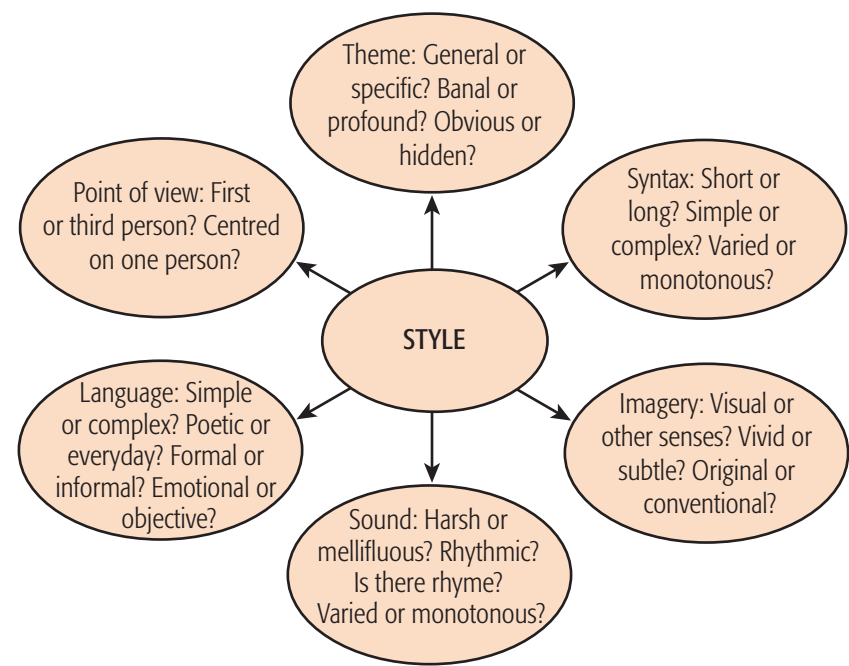
Throughout this book you are being asked to think not only about what writers are saying – the content of their work – but also about *how* they write. This means examining the particular combination of literary devices, structures, and vocabulary which a writer uses and which go together to form that writer's individual "style". From your own reading you will know that some writers' work is easy to recognize immediately because they have a distinctive "style". However, it can be more difficult to explain exactly which characteristics make a writer's style recognizable.

As a student of literature, you will need to develop the ability to analyse and write about style. One shortcoming noted by examiners is that students fail to take account of this and do not engage in enough detailed analysis of how texts are written. It is easier to concentrate on the writer's use of language when studying poetry, but it can be tempting, when writing about novels or other longer prose works, to focus on the content or the ideas and neglect to examine other features that make up the writer's style.

"A writer's personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner."

Zadie Smith

The following are aspects of prose that you need to examine:



Thinking or feeling

“Style” can also be viewed as the expression of a writer’s personality and preoccupations. The ways in which writers experience the world and the things which are most important to them are bound to affect how and what they write. Most writing involves thinking but it is not just a cerebral activity. Although all good writers “craft” their work carefully, even when they wish to convey emotional or sensual experiences, there can be unconscious influences, especially for writers who use more intuitive or free-ranging techniques, allowing their words to flow without controlling them too carefully.

Activity

D.H. Lawrence writes extensively about the emotional reactions of his characters but he does not always reveal their characters directly; instead, he uses imagery and actions to suggest hidden aspects of personalities and relationships. In the following extract from *Sons and Lovers*, identify the images and try to find out what they tell us about the characters. Discuss with a partner how Lawrence uses these images.

In this extract Paul Morel, the protagonist, is just getting to know Miriam Leivers. On the basis of their reactions in this extract, what do you think their relationship will be like?

Sons and Lovers

‘It’s a treat of a swing,’ he said.

‘Yes.’

He was swinging through the air, every bit of him swinging, like a bird that swoops for joy of movement. And he looked down at her. Her crimson cap hung

over her dark curls, her beautiful warm face, so still in a kind of brooding, was lifted towards him. It was dark and rather cold in the shed. Suddenly a swallow came down from the high roof and darted out of the door.

‘I didn’t know a bird was watching,’ he called.

He swung negligently. She could feel him falling and lifting through the air, as if he were lying on some force.

‘Now I’ll die,’ he said, in a detached, dreamy voice, as though he were the dying motion of the swing. She watched him, fascinated. Suddenly he put on the brake and jumped out.

‘I’ve had a long turn,’ he said. ‘But it’s a treat of a swing – it’s a real treat of a swing!’

Miriam was amused that he took a swing so seriously and felt so warmly over it.

‘No; you go on,’ she said.

‘Why, don’t you want one?’ he asked, astonished.

‘Well, not much. I’ll have just a little.’

She sat down, whilst he kept the bags in place for her.

‘It’s so ripping!’ he said, setting her in motion. ‘Keep your heels up, or they’ll bang the manger-wall.’

She felt the accuracy with which he caught her, exactly at the right moment, and the exactly proportionate strength of his thrust, and she was afraid. Down to her bowels went the hot wave of fear. She was in his hands. Again, firm and inevitable came the thrust at the right moment. She gripped the rope, almost swooning.

‘Ha!’ she laughed in fear. ‘No higher!’

‘But you’re not a *bit* high,’ he remonstrated.

‘But no higher.’

He heard the fear in her voice, and desisted. Her heart melted in hot pain when the moment came for him to thrust her forward again. But he left her alone. She began to breathe.

‘Won’t you really go any farther?’ he asked. “Should I keep you there?”

‘No; let me go by myself,’ she answered.

He moved aside and watched her.

‘Why, you’re scarcely moving,’ he said.

She laughed slightly with shame, and in a moment got down.

‘They say if you can swing you won’t be sea-sick,’ he said, as he mounted again. ‘I don’t believe I should ever be sea-sick.’

Away he went. There was something fascinating to her in him. For the moment he was nothing but a piece of swinging stuff; not a particle of him that did not swing. She could never lose herself, so, nor could her brothers. It roused a warmth in her. It was almost as if he were a flame that had lit a warmth in her whilst he swung in the middle air.

D.H. Lawrence



Activity

Write character studies of Paul and Miriam based on what you have learned from the above extract. Include a consideration of how their different reactions to the swing could foreshadow the nature of their relationship.

1–2–4 method

When you are first learning how to write commentaries, an extract or a poem can be very daunting. You may read it through and think of nothing to say. It is much easier, at this stage, to work with others. The 1–2–4 method is very useful. For this exercise you need at least four people.

Stage 1 Each person, on his or her own, writes down three points about the extract (or poem) to be analysed. These points can be very obvious (for example, there are three paragraphs), or they can be put in the form of a question. It does not matter as long as you write down three comments.

Stage 2 In pairs, look at the six statements you have made between you and try to put them in order of importance.

Stage 3 Now form a group of four. On the basis of the two lists you have, decide what are the key points you wish to make about the extract. For example: What is it about? What is the point of view? In what style is it written? And so on. By this stage you will find that you are very likely to have a good understanding of the passage, as well as being able to make pertinent comments about the way it is written.

Activity

Read the passage that follows, taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and use the 1–2–4 method to understand what it is about and make comments on how it is written. After your discussions you will find it is easier to write your own commentary on the passage.

The Scarlet Letter

When the young woman – the mother of this child – stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might

thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and, with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was lady-like, too, after the manner of feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace, which is now recognized as its indication. And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. It may be true, that, to a sensitive observer, there was something exquisitely painful in it. Her attire, which, indeed, she had wrought for the occasion, in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity. But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer, – so that both men and women, who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time, – was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself.

‘She hath good skill at her needle, that’s certain,’ remarked one of the female spectators; ‘but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?’

‘It were well,’ muttered the most iron-visaged of the old dames, ‘if we stripped Madam Hester’s rich gown off her dainty shoulders; and as for the red letter, which she hath stitched so curiously, I’ll bestow a rag of mine own rheumatic flannel, to make a fitter one!’

‘O, peace, neighbours, peace!’ whispered their youngest companion, ‘Do not let her hear you! Not a stitch in that embroidered letter, but she has felt it in her heart.’

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Activity

Read the following passage from the opening of a novel by Iain Banks. Working with a partner, make notes on the passage in preparation for writing a commentary on it. You might like to think about how character is conveyed through use of detail; what Banks's style is like; how humorous effects are created; the relationship between the protagonist/narrator and his family.

The Crow Road

It was the day my grandmother exploded. I sat in the crematorium, listening to my Uncle Hamish quietly snoring in harmony to Bach's Mass in B Minor, and I reflected that it always seemed to be death that drew me back to Gallanach.

I looked at my father, sitting two rows away in the front line of seats in the cold, echoing chapel. His broad, greying-brown head was massive above his tweed jacket (a black arm-band was his concession to the solemnity of the occasion). His ears were moving in a slow oscillatory manner, rather in the way John Wayne's shoulders moved when he walked; my father was grinding his teeth. Probably he was annoyed that my grandmother had chosen religious music for her funeral ceremony. I didn't think she had done it to upset him; doubtless she had simply liked the tune, and had not anticipated the effect its non-secular nature might have on her eldest son.

My younger brother, James, sat to my father's left. It was the first time in years I'd seen him without his Walkman, and he looked distinctly uncomfortable, fiddling with his single earring. To my father's right my mother sat, upright and trim, neatly filling a black coat and sporting a dramatic black hat shaped like a flying saucer. The UFO dipped briefly to one side as she whispered something to my father. In that movement and that moment, I felt a pang of loss that did not entirely belong to my recently departed grandmother, yet was connected with her memory. How her moles would be itching today if she was somehow suddenly reborn!

'Prentice!' My Aunt Antonia, sitting next to me, with Uncle Hamish snoring mellifluously on her other side, tapped my sleeve and pointed at my feet as she murmured my name. I looked down.

I had dressed in black that morning, in the cold high room of my aunt and uncle's house. The floorboards had creaked and my breath had smoked. There had been ice inside the small dormer window, obscuring the view over Gallanach in a crystalline mist. I'd pulled on a pair of black underpants I'd brought especially from Glasgow, a white shirt (fresh from Marks and Sparks, the pack-lines still ridging the cold, crisp cotton) and my black 501s. I'd shivered, and sat on the bed, looking at two pairs of socks; one black, one white. I'd intended to wear the black pair under my nine-eye Docs with the twin ankle buckles, but suddenly I had felt that the boots were wrong. Maybe it was because they were matt finish...

The last funeral I'd been to here – also the first funeral I'd ever been to – this gear had all seemed pretty appropriate, but now I was pondering the propriety of the Docs, the 501s, and the black biker's jacket. I'd hauled my white trainers out of

the bag, tried one Nike on and one boot (unlaced); I'd stood in front of the tilted full-length mirror, shivering, my breath going out in clouds, while the floorboards creaked and a smell of cooking bacon and burned toast insinuated its way up from the kitchen.

The trainers, I'd decided.

So I peered down at them in the crematorium; they looked crumpled and tea-stained on the severe black granite of the chapel floor. Oh-oh; one black sock, one white. I wriggled in my seat, pulled my jeans down to cover my oddly-packaged ankles. 'Hell's teeth,' I whispered. 'Sorry, Aunt Tone.'

My Aunt Antonia – a ball of pink-rinse hair above the bulk of her black coat, like candy floss stuck upon a hearse – patted my leather jacket. 'Never mind, dear,' she sighed. 'I doubt old Margot would have minded.'

'No,' I nodded. My gaze fell back to the trainers. It struck me that on the toe of the right one there was still discernible the tyre mark from Grandma Margot's wheelchair. I lifted the left trainer onto the right, and rubbed without enthusiasm at the black herring-bone pattern the oily wheel had left. I remembered the day, six months earlier, when I had pushed old Margot out of the house and through the courtyard, past the outhouses and down the drive under the trees towards the loch and the sea.

Iain Banks

Activity

Read this student's response to this extract from *The Crow Road* and then read the comments on its strengths and weaknesses which follow.

Commentary

The extract from the novel "The Crow Road" by Iain Banks is rather unusual. The passage describes his family at his grandmother's cremation in his home town of Gallanach. The piece is unusual as it is written in a jovial style which is not often connected with death except in black comedy. However, this is not a comedy so it is unusual. The opening sentence, "It was the day my grandmother exploded" is so surprising when put in context with the rest of the passage.

The narrator does not dwell on the grief of losing a member of his family, but more so on his isolation from his parents. In a movement his mother makes to his father he feels "a pang of loss that did not entirely belong to my recently departed grandmother".

The fact he has had to stay at his aunt and uncle's house and is sitting with them shows his isolation from his parents. The narrator does not seem to "fit in" with the rest of his family. His clothes are different and his whole attitude towards the funeral is distracted.

This distraction of the narrator is shown in his digressions from the funeral. He notices his father's ears move, as he grinds his teeth, like "John Wayne's shoulders when he walks". He notices his brother James is not wearing

his Walkman for the first time in years and that his mother’s dramatic hat is shaped like a UFO. There do not seem to be many emotions shown by the narrator, nor any of the other characters. He remarks how his father is probably angry his grandmother had chosen religious music for her funeral ceremony instead of secular, as he would have wanted. His Uncle Hamish has fallen asleep and is snoring “in harmony to Bach’s Mass in B Minor”; he is obviously oblivious or uncaring of the situation around him.

The narrator tries to create a cold atmosphere, one traditionally associated with death. They are sitting in the cold “echoing chapel” which emulates a feeling of emptiness and loss. The cold temperature of his bedroom, however, which the author embellishes upon, seems to be more related to his isolation from his family. The fact he is not in his parents’ home shows how they have excluded him from their lives. Also that they do not sit with him at the chapel. The atmosphere is not maintained as the author makes comical asides which are more light-hearted, for example the references to John Wayne and the UFO and the fact his boots didn’t look right because they had a matt finish. Also, how he has odd socks on and his description of his Aunt Antonia being like “candy floss stuck upon a hearse”.

From this passage, the narrator shows himself to be a young man who has moved away from his home town, possibly without his parents’ blessing as they have become disassociated. The narrator shows that he did love his grandmother Margot as he describes a fond memory of her at the end of the passage, yet shows no real signs of grief.

This passage is quite effective as the opening of a novel as it makes me want to read on. It provides details of what are, presumably, the main characters (his family) and it would be interesting to find out what happens next. His jovial style is easy to read and understand, being quite light-hearted.

Examiner’s comments

The student provides a clear introductory paragraph, giving enough information to put the passage in context without wasting time on paraphrasing.

She describes the style as “jovial”. This may be a good way to describe it, but she will need to clarify what she means by explaining fully later in the essay. Perhaps a more accurate word to express what she means would be “humorous”. The reference to black comedy is very useful. Again she needs to pick out examples of this later, even though she has stated that the passage as a whole is not comedy.

She comments on the surprising first sentence in relation to the rest of the passage. A fuller analysis would improve this. For example, she could point out the strangely matter-of-fact tone of the sentence and the shocking effect of the word “exploded” when applied to a “grandmother”.

Her point in paragraph 3 about the narrator seeming isolated from his parents is a good one. We have to be careful, though, not to speculate too far. From this extract, we do not know that the whole family were not staying with the aunt and uncle! It’s best to keep to points for which you can find evidence in the passage. However, within the extract, there is a sense of his distance from his parents.

The student has pointed out that the narrator’s clothes are different, but could expand on this. What do the details of his clothes tell us about him? They could suggest an image or stereotype: “Nine-eye Docs, 501s and the black biker’s jacket”.

She makes a good point about the narrator’s “digressions” in paragraph 4, giving examples of how his attention wanders to dwell on the people around him. Again, she could comment more analytically about these, on what they tell

us about the members of his family and also, through his choice of words, about himself. For example, the similes he uses, referring to John Wayne and UFOs, suggest the popular culture of film stars and science fiction, which contrasts with the sombre music his grandmother has chosen. It seems that his brother, too, with his earring, but without his Walkman, has made concessions for the occasion.

In paragraph 5, the student’s remarks on atmosphere are apt, the quotation is helpful, and she has added some further comment. She could also go on to say something about the use of colour in the passage. Repeated “black” and “white” are appropriate for cold and death. Having mentioned the aunt’s pink hair, she could go on to explain why this is humorous: its inappropriateness among all the black, which is captured by the candy-floss/hearse image.

The penultimate paragraph is disappointing. The student is rather too concerned with inventing theories about the young man’s background at the expense of paying close attention to the details that are provided.

This highlights a broader point. The texts chosen for the commentary are specially selected so that there is as little chance as possible that students will have already read them or be familiar with them. However, if you are familiar with the whole text from which the extract has been set, although your previous knowledge of the text may help you to understand it and the way it is written more readily, you will need to avoid letting your wider knowledge distract you from focusing on and making deductions from the details of the passage itself. Remember, the whole focus on the commentary is only on the text you are given on the exam paper.

The student begins to explore the narrator’s reference to his grandmother at the end; however, we are not given any evidence in the extract that the memory is a “fond” one, as she claims.

The passage has obviously captured the student’s interest, and her final paragraph provides a fair summing up of her response, but overall the paragraphing and general organization of the commentary could have been improved.

However, there is more to notice about the young man in relation to his family and the scene at the crematorium. Here are some suggestions:

- His outward “style” and image, which suggest rebellious youth, could lead to his being labelled uncaring. It contrasts with the conventional dress of his older relatives. As the student’s commentary above points out, he does not overtly declare his emotions or much sense of loss, although we do not detect much emotion in the other characters either.
- In opposition to this is his painful preoccupation with “getting it right”. He is very concerned that his dress should be appropriate, so he does care. In a strange sense, what seemed inappropriate is in fact fitting: the white trainers carry the mark of his grandmother’s wheelchair, and serve as a record of their last meeting, and of his having shown his care of her. The adults, on the other hand, may be dressed more conventionally, but seem, if anything, to be less involved in the proceedings.

Activity

Now look at another student’s commentary, which has different qualities. Read it carefully, noting its strengths and suggesting how it could be improved. In particular look at:

- major points the student has noticed about the passage
- how well his ideas are supported with evidence
- the appropriateness of quotations from the text
- his analysis of the writer’s style
- how well is it written; is it well-organized?
- technical accuracy: punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling.

Commentary

This passage is an effective opening to the novel, as the first sentence “It was the day my grandmother exploded” grabs the reader’s attention instantly. This opening line also establishes the mood of the piece, a quite darkly humorous style – the various family members present at the crematorium are described in a lot of detail – the images created of them are expanded upon (the narrator’s mother is said to be wearing a hat that looks like a flying saucer – this is furthered when we are given the image of it “dipping” to the side when she talks). There is a very sarcastic tone to the passage in places, such as when the narrator tells us his father is probably “annoyed that my grandmother had chosen religious music for her funeral ceremony”, and the constant references to Uncle Hamish snoring in the background – this style of humor fits in quite well with the proceedings as it isn’t (for want of a better term) “Har-de-har-har” humor – it is subtle, and certain points about it are written in such a way, that they could just be taken as extra description of the events (the flashback to the narrator getting dressed is a good example – with him rattling off precise descriptions of his clothes, and where they are from). The atmosphere, despite the humor, is retained: the formal mood is (kind of) still there, and there are references to the cold atmosphere to add to this (although this refers to the morning, it still has an effect on the scene at hand). Also, a lot of the comments from the narrator (who seems to be taking the event as a sort of “family reunion” – or a freak show, depending) are linked with death, even if in an obscure way such as referring to somebody as looking like candy floss stuck on a hearse – which in itself, is mixing something associated with fun & something associated with death – much like the whole passage.

PS – is the “smell of cooking bacon & burned toast” line a really sick reference to the cremation taking place?

Activity

Now read carefully the following extract from *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, written by Earl Lovelace in 1979. Make notes on the key elements of the passage that you would wish to include in a commentary. Use whatever approach you think suitable.

The Dragon Can’t Dance

Up on the Hill Carnival Monday morning breaks upon the backs of these thin shacks with no cock’s crow, and before the mist clears, little boys, costumed in old dresses, their heads tied, holding brooms made from the ribs of coconut palm leaves, blowing whistles and beating kerosene tins for drums, move across the face of the awakening Hill, sweeping yards in a ritual, heralding the masqueraders’ coming, that goes back centuries for its beginnings, back across the Middle Passage, back to Mali and to Guinea and Dahomey and Congo, back to Africa when Maskers were sacred and revered, the keepers of the poisons and heads of secret societies, and such children went before them, clearing the ground, announcing their coming to the huts before which they would dance and make their terrible cries, affirming for the village, the tribe, warriorhood and femininity, linking the villagers to their ancestors, their Gods, remembered even now, so

long after the Crossing, if not in the brain, certainly in the blood; so that every Carnival Monday morning, Aldrick Prospect, with only the memory burning in his blood, a memory that had endured the three hundred odd years to Calvary Hill felt, as he put on his dragon costume, a sense of entering a sacred mask that invested him with an ancestral authority to uphold before the people of this Hill, this tribe marooned so far from the homeland that never was their home, the warriorhood that had not died in them, their humanness that was determined not by their possession of things. He had a desire, a mission, to let them see their beauty, to uphold the unending rebellion they waged, huddled here on this stone and dirt hill hanging over the city like the open claws on a dragon’s hand, threatening destruction if they were not recognized as human beings.

But this Carnival, putting on his costume now at dawn, Aldrick had a feeling of being the last one, the last symbol of rebellion and threat to confront Port of Spain.* Fisheye was under orders not to misbehave, Philo had given up on his own calypsos of rebellion to sing now about the Axe Man. Once upon a time the entire Carnival was expressions of rebellion. Once there were stickfighters who assembled each year to keep alive in battles between themselves the practice of a warriorhood born in them; and there were devils, black men who blackened themselves further with black grease to make of their very blackness a menace, a threat. They moved along the streets with horns on their heads and tridents in hand. They threatened to press their blackened selves against the well dressed spectators unless they were given money. And there were the jab jabs, men in jester costumes, their caps and shoes filled with tinkling bells, cracking long whips in the streets, with which they lashed each other with full force, proclaiming in this display that they could receive the hardest blow without flinching at its coming, without feeling what, at its landing, must have been burning pain. Suddenly they were all gone, outlawed from the city or just died, gone, and he felt alone. The dragon alone was left to carry the message. He felt that now, alone, with even Philo and Fisheye gone, it was too great to carry. It would be lost now among the clowns, among the fancy robbers and the fantasy presentations that were steadily entering Carnival; drowned amidst the satin and silks and the beads and feathers and rhinestones. But bothering him even more than this was the thought that maybe he didn’t believe in the dragon any more.

Earl Lovelace

*The capital of the Caribbean island of Trinidad

Activity

Here are notes made by one student about the text. Read them carefully and compare them with your own comments, noting key similarities and differences in your analysis.

Commentary

1 Content: This extract from “The Dragon Can’t Dance” describes what the Carnival is like in Trinidad from the view of Aldrick Prospect who wears a dragon costume on Carnival Monday. He not only describes the present-day carnival but also what it used to be like in times when the Carnival was a

symbol of rebellion. It is very detailed, listing all the different types of people who participate in it.

2 Structure: The passage is divided into two paragraphs. The first describes the boys who sweep the streets and connects them to earlier rituals carried out in African countries where their ancestors came from. These rituals assert their warriorhood and humanity and now their rebellion against their loss of status as independent people.

The second paragraph mourns the loss of the old customs of carnival, when men put black grease on themselves and intimidated the crowd into giving them money, and when others whipped themselves to show that they could endure pain. Some of these men had died and some of the practices had been made illegal. Aldrick feels that he is the only one left to carry on the traditions and that maybe even he does not believe in it any more.

The sentence structure is unusual. There are only two sentences in the first paragraph. The length suggests the long trailing procession of the carnival; like the sentence it goes on and on. In the second paragraph the sentences are shorter as here they are listing the elements that have disappeared and each one needs to be highlighted.

3 Point of view: The scene is described from Aldrick Prospect's point of view. As he is a participant, not a spectator we are given an insider's view. He describes what he sees, and what he has seen as well as letting us know his feelings about the Carnival. His descriptions are both celebratory and nostalgic. He makes the reader also feel sad at the loss of the rituals that connected the present to the past – not just the past in Trinidad but also the past in Africa.

4 Diction: The two most remarkable features of this passage are listing and detailed description. Not only do we learn about the little boys but also that they wear old dresses, carry brooms, blow whistles and beat drums. This enables the reader to visualize very clearly what is happening. The repetition can be found in the grammatical features seen in the use of words ending in "ing": "blowing", "beating", "sweeping", "heralding", "clearing", "announcing", "affirming". This gives the feeling of constant movement that is happening now. In the second paragraph, the two sentences beginning with "Once" and two others with "They moved" and "They threatened" emphasize the past events which Aldrick misses. Also the repetition of "alone" near the end isolates Aldrick from the rest of the Carnival. The language used contains many adjectives which help add visual and aural details to the scene but the overwhelming effect is of being battered with images, in the same way as one would feel if one was actually present at the Carnival.

5 Theme: What central point is Lovelace trying to convey? He does not just wish to describe the Carnival and allow readers to enjoy and appreciate its magnificence. He wants to convey to us its importance in the lives of the people who are descended from African slaves; to show that they were a warlike, but lively people bursting with energy and rebellion; to show how pagan rituals were still echoed in the activities of the Carnival participants; but above all to indicate how sad it is that the Carnival has become tamed. It now has "fancy robbers" not real ones, and "fantasy presentations", which are empty parodies of what was once real, vibrant and meaningful.

Activity

Now write your own commentary on the following extract from *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris. Some guiding questions have been given, which are like those given to Standard Level candidates in the Paper 1 exam.

The passage is followed by a student response. After you have finished writing your own response, read the student's commentary carefully, together with the examiner's comments that follow.

- What do you learn about the narrator and the young girl?
- In what ways does the writer appeal to the senses?
- How is the atmosphere conveyed?
- What is the importance of the carnival?

February 11, Shrove Tuesday

We came on the wind of the carnival. A warm wind for February, laden with the hot greasy scents of frying pancakes and sausages and powdery-sweet waffles cooked on the hotplate right there by the roadside, with the confetti sleeting down collars and cuffs and rolling in the gutters like an idiot antidote to winter. There is a febrile excitement in the crowds which line the narrow street, necks craning to catch sight of the crêpe-covered *char* with its trailing ribbons and paper rosettes. Anouk watches, eyes wide, a yellow balloon in one hand and a toy trumpet in the other, from between a shopping-basket and a sad brown dog. We have seen carnivals before, she and I; a procession of two hundred and fifty of the decorated *chars* in Paris last Mardi Gras, a hundred and eighty in New York, two dozen marching bands in Vienna, clowns on stilts, the *Grosses Têtes* with their lolling papier-mâché heads, drum majorettes with batons spinning and sparkling. But at six the world retains a special lustre. A wooden cart, hastily decorated with gilt and crêpe and scenes from fairy tales. A dragon's head on a shield, Rapunzel in a woollen wig, a mermaid with a Cellophane tail, a gingerbread house all icing and gilded cardboard, a witch in the doorway, wagging extravagant green fingernails at a group of silent children... At six it is possible to perceive subtleties which a year later are already out of reach. Behind the papier-mâché, the icing, the plastic, she can still see the real witch, the real magic. She looks up at me, her eyes, which are the blue-green of the Earth seen from a great height, shining.

'Are we staying? Are we staying here?' I have to remind her to speak French. 'But are we? Are we?' She clings to my sleeve. Her hair is a candyfloss tangle in the wind.

I consider. It's as good a place as any. Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, two hundred souls at most, no more than a blip on the fast road between Toulouse and Bordeaux. Blink once and it's gone. One main street, a double row of dun-coloured half-timbered houses leaning secretively together, a few laterals running parallel like the tines of a bent fork. A church, aggressively whitewashed, in a square of little shops. Farms scattered across the watchful land. Orchards, vineyards, strips of earth enclosed and regimented according to the strict apartheid of country farming: here apples, there kiwis, melons, endives beneath their black plastic shells, vines looking blighted and dead in the thin February sun but awaiting

triumphant resurrection by March... Behind that, the Tannes, small tributary of the Garonne, fingers its way across the marshy pasture. And the people? They look much like all others we have known; a little pale perhaps in the unaccustomed sunlight, a little drab. Headscarves and berets are the colour of the hair beneath, brown, black or grey. Faces are lined like last summer's apples, eyes pushed into wrinkled flesh like marbles into old dough. A few children, flying colours of red and lime-green and yellow, seem like a different race. As the *char* advances ponderously along the street behind the old tractor which pulls it, a large woman with a square, unhappy face clutches a tartan coat about her shoulders and shouts something in the half-comprehensible local dialect; on the wagon a squat Santa Claus, out-of-season amongst the fairies and sirens and goblins, hurls sweets at the crowd with barely restrained aggression. An elderly small-featured man, wearing a felt hat rather than the round beret more common to the region, picks up the sad brown dog from between my legs with a look of polite apology. I see his thin graceful fingers moving in the dog's fur; the dog whines; the master's expression becomes complex with love, concern, guilt. No-one looks at us. We might as well be invisible; our clothing marks us as strangers, transients. They are polite, so polite; no-one stares at us. The woman, her long silk scarf fluttering at her throat; the child in yellow wellingtons and sky-blue mac. Their colouring marks them. Their clothes are exotic, their faces – are they too pale or too dark? – their hair marks them other, foreign, indefinably strange. The people of Lansquenet have learned the art of observation without eye contact. I feel their gaze like a breath on the nape of my neck, strangely without hostility but cold nevertheless. We are a curiosity to them, a part of the carnival, a whiff of the outlands. I feel their eyes upon us as I turn to buy a *galette* from the vendor. The paper is hot and greasy, the dark wheat pancake crispy at the edges but thick and good in the centre. I break off a piece and give it to Anouk, wiping melted butter from her chin. The vendor is a plump, balding man with thick glasses, his face slick with the steam from the hot plate. He winks at her. With the other eye he takes in every detail, knowing there will be questions later.

'On holiday, Madame?' Village etiquette allows him to ask; behind his tradesman's indifference I see a real hunger. Knowledge is currency here; with Agen and Montauban so close, tourists are a rarity.

'For a while.'

'From Paris, then?' It must be our clothes. In this garish land the people are drab. Colour is a luxury; it wears badly. The bright blossoms of the roadside are weeds, invasive, useless.

'No, no, not Paris.'

The *char* is almost at the end of the street. A small band – two fifes, two trumpets, a trombone and a side drum – follows it, playing a thin unidentifiable march. A dozen children scamper in its wake, picking up the unclaimed sweets. Some are in costume; I see Little Red Riding Hood and a shaggy person who might be the wolf squabbling companionably over possession of a handful of streamers.

A black figure brings up the rear. At first I take him for a part of the parade – the Plague Doctor, maybe – but as he approaches I recognize the old-fashioned soutane of the country priest. He is in his thirties, though from a distance his rigid stance makes him seem older. He turns towards me, and I see that he too is a stranger, with the high cheekbones and pale eyes of the North and long pianist's fingers resting on the silver cross which hangs from his neck. Perhaps this is what gives him the right to stare at me, this alienness; but I see no welcome in his cold, light eyes. Only the measuring, feline look of one who is uncertain of his territory. I smile at him; he looks away, startled, beckons the two children towards him. A gesture indicates the litter which now lines the road; reluctantly the pair begin to clear it, scooping up spent streamers and sweet-wrappers in their arms and into a nearby bin. I catch the priest staring at me again as I turn away, a look which in another man might have been of appraisal.

There is no police station at Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, therefore no crime. I try to be like Anouk, to see beneath the disguise to the truth, but for now everything is blurred.

'Are we staying? Are we, *Maman*?' she tugs at my arm, insistently. 'I like it, I like it here. Are we staying?'

I catch her up into my arms and kiss the top of her head. She smells of smoke and frying pancakes and warm bedclothes on a winter's morning.

Why not? It's as good a place as any.

'Yes, of course,' I tell her, my mouth in her hair. 'Of course we are.'

Not quite a lie. This time it may even be true.

Joanne Harris

Commentary

This extract, the opening of the novel *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris, tells how a mother and her young daughter, Anouk, arrive at a small rural town in France with a possibility that they might settle there.

In the town, Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, a carnival is taking place when the two arrive and it is interesting to see how some of the participants are described: "Rapunzel in a woollen wig, a mermaid with a Cellophane tail, a gingerbread house all icing and gilded cardboard..." These descriptions are a mixture of the fantasy and the ordinary, even the carnival float is merely "A wooden cart, hastily decorated with gilt and crêpe". They suggest a strong degree of transparency – perhaps a symbolic indication of what is to come further in the novel. Indeed, the carnival itself appears to be a weak attempt to impress when compared, by Anouk's mother, with other carnivals both she and her daughter have seen: "a procession of two hundred and fifty of the decorated chars in Paris, a hundred and eighty in New York, two dozen marching bands in Vienna, clowns on stilts... drum majorettes with batons spinning and sparkling".

The small town itself is described in a less than favourable light. Some of the descriptions used, such as "a blip on the fast road...", "Blink once and

it's gone", rather than implying a quaint rural village appear to emphasize its insignificance. There is also the suggestion of something secretive and sinister about the place. For example, the "main street" is described as a "double row of dun-coloured houses leaning secretively together" and this is surrounded by "Farms scattered across the watchful land". These descriptions are not only effective in portraying an isolated, tight-knit community but they also arouse a degree of curiosity in the reader as to why they might be considering settling there.

There is obviously a strong religious presence within the community, although from the way both the church and the priest are described, this appears to be a restricting, dominating force in the town. For instance, the church is described as being "aggressively whitewashed" and the priest himself, "a black figure" who could be mistaken for a character from the procession, "the Plague Doctor", appears to be not only a spoilsport but a dominant figure as he insists on making the playing children clean up carnival debris by just "a gesture". Later in the piece the priest is described in greater detail, which reinforces the idea that he is a dominant but unpleasant figure, with a "rigid stance", "pale eyes", and his "high cheekbones" suggest a degree of superciliousness, especially with his "fingers resting on the silver cross which hangs from his neck". In addition, his look is described as "measuring", which implies that he is somewhat judgemental in an unchristian way.

The adult residents are also described in an unfavourable manner, which contrasts markedly with the descriptions of the children of the village. For instance, the adults are described as being somewhat insignificant: "They look much like all others we have known" and are "a little drab", and the colours used to describe their clothing and hair project "dull" images: "brown, black or grey". Their faces are described as being "lined like last summer's apples", which gives a wizened impression and suggests a sense of lifelessness which is also emphasized by their eyes being "pushed into wrinkled flesh like marbles into old dough". The descriptions of the children, on the other hand, contain life and vivid colour: "A few children, flying colours of red and lime-green and yellow". Indeed, they "seem like a different race" and they appear to inject a degree of energy in a town where even the dog is described as "sad".

The residents seem to be quite insular and suspicious of "outsiders", and although the mother in the story tells us that "No-one looks at us" she gets the impression that "We are a curiosity to them". This seems not to be surprising considering how the mother's appearance contrasts with that of the villagers, "her long silk scarf fluttering at her throat..." and with her "exotic" clothes. However, it is interesting to see that the daughter's appearance, although she too wears "exotic" clothes, is as colourful as the other children in the village. Perhaps this is an indication that she will be accepted more easily than her mother. Indeed the daughter appears to like the place: "I like it, I like it here. Are we staying?"

There is an indication that the unwelcoming feel of the place might alter later in the novel, in the line "Vines looking blighted and dead... but awaiting triumphant resurrection by March". This appears to be supported by the sense of magic induced into the writing in the opening line "We came on the wind of the carnival", the phrase being reminiscent of "the winds of change". Indeed, it would appear that magic is needed if the rural town with its "strips

of earth enclosed and regimented according to the strict apartheid of country farming" is to become anything else but "drab".

Harris uses language to great effect in this piece. The many sensory inclusions, such as "hot greasy scents of frying pancakes and sausages and powdery-sweet waffles", helps us to share the carnival experience, and the simile used to describe the confetti falling is particularly effective here: "like an idiot antidote to winter", especially considering the weak attempts made to dress up for the carnival. She also uses an abundance of adjectives in her similes, which add a richness to the narrative. For instance, she describes her daughter's eyes as being "the blue-green of the Earth seen from a great height, shining". Harris also includes a degree of ambiguity which succeeds in arousing curiosity. For example, at the beginning of this piece, the line "but at six the world retains a special lustre" seems a little out of place and its meaning is unclear. A little later, the line "At six it is possible to perceive subtleties which a year later are already out of reach" also appears to be unconnected, but the meaning will become clear later in the novel. In addition, some of the words are written in French and their meaning can be tentatively assumed. For example, the word "char" is unusual but, through the reading of the passage, can be assumed to be a carnival float. This technique adds a degree of interest and colour to the extract.

The piece is definitely an effective opening. The ambiguity created and the curiosity raised by Harris makes the reader want to find out whether such a well-travelled pair who have visited Paris, New York, and Vienna will stay in such a "drab" town – indeed, why they have ever gone there in the first place.

Examiner's comments

- This is a perceptive commentary in which the student pays attention to:

 - the vocabulary used by the writer
 - the effects of imagery in conveying the atmosphere of the town
 - the sensual descriptions
- the contrast between the visitors and the people of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes
 - the narrative technique which makes one wonder what will happen next
 - the hints of conflict – perhaps between the narrator and the priest.

Activity

You have now read two accounts of carnivals. With a partner make a comparison between the descriptions. List the similarities and differences. Do you think one description is more effective than the other?

The next passage is a short story. Read it carefully and write a commentary on it.

A Gift

I am gifting you an experience, were your parting words. You ultimate egoist. Whichever way I look at it that sentiment yields no other meaning. And who are you to make this gift? In an artist, such detachment might be forgivable, an act of generosity even.

My experience is of my own making, thank you, my own perceptions. You can impinge on it only if I will it. Will-power, that limp uninflatable thing that hung around my self-hood, making its presence felt as the missing dimension... from the moment that you first entered that crowded room and diminished everyone by your appearance, your personality clearing a path for you. I thought at the time that I noticed you because you had such a fiery commitment to your politics, because you spoke not fluently but in a rush as if you had a pact with silence, and because somewhere deep down stirred an old memory about the romance of a French accent.

The party, to which we owed varying degrees of loyalty, threw us together with a determinism that left no room for dialectics. You had entered my consciousness like air in my lungs – essential but unfelt, gossamer like, even insubstantial. And when you entered again and again, my skin thinned, like a balloon overblown, replete at the point of rupture.

We found ourselves together on the same Saturday morning outside the same supermarkets to get guilty shoppers to help prolong the miners' strike, distributing leaflets outside the same tube stations to advertise a public meeting, holding either pole of the same banner at the same demo and rolling cigarettes for each other with fingers turned to stone by the February chill. Was it surprising then that we took turns to buy each other drinks when the day's work was done? And that the emptiness of our stomachs drove us to the fish and chips shop or a sit down Chinese meal, depending on the fullness of our pockets.

I enjoyed your presence like an old and deep friendship with an affection which made up in intensity what it lacked in maturity. And from the political, we moved to the personal. You asked, if your nose was prominent? (Do you really care?) How can I tell? Each time my eyes travel to make a judgement, they are drawn upwards by the power of your eyes and consumed, slithering sideways and away to a confused middle distance. I could not trust myself on personal grounds. And yet I could not keep politics forever on the agenda. So I tried to counter that by asking, do you like the shape of my shoulders? From where you stand, you have to look at them so often that you must have an opinion about them. Your eyes admitted the frivolity of your concern with your nose. Touché. I won that round. Now maybe we can go back into the safer waters of the impersonal.

But again, you chose to discuss the political implications of one person's passion for another. Studying the hairs on the barman's fingers, I talked passionately about the destructiveness of passion and how I would personally choose to steer clear. And you agreed and said you were good at that too. We stopped talking. We were interrupted by the silence that fell around us.

Your loyalty to silence proved to be your preservation. Being uncomfortable with silence, became my undoing – my self-respect lay in shreds like a soaring kite grounded. Only on Sunday afternoons, when you liked to unwind by playing Scrabble, would words that choked on your vocal chords come pouring out of your fingers. On one such afternoon, my words shrank on the Scrabble board as they grew and rioted inside my mouth, tumbling from my lips in cascades of incoherence. You must've known then. I wiped my mouth. Perhaps I had

overcreamed my lips to preserve them from winter's chafing touch and words ungripped slipped out or was it, pure and simple, nervousness? I talked about how you filled the room, about my mother, about my past loves and the present vacuum as I placed the word "cue" on the board.

Your turn, I said. You continued to shuffle and clink the letters, the noise crowding out your silence. It was the first time your silence felt cold, a refusal to communicate. This was the first time I had been first to make a declaration of love. My incoherence and your silence. My head began to ache with an infinite series of interpretations. My heart throbbed through my eyes and my vision came in diastolic and systolic rhythms.

Through your lowered lids, your eyes bounced off the board and reduced my confusion to cinders. Then, grasping their victory for one split second, they smiled warmly. I don't believe in possession, she said, but basically I am a one-woman woman. I met her last summer. But don't let this put you off, she said, allowing her fingers to stray off the board and locking my hand in hers, "loving women is much better for your sanity than loving men". She swept all my crumbling certainties aside in that fleeting touch which brought heaven vibrating through my blood. I had never been attracted to other women and never would be again. Never, she mocked, tchtu, tchtu, that's a dangerous word. I felt myself drowning and tried to hold on to some understanding of the situation. I was trying to elicit the essence of it, I was writing about it even as I was living it – men, power, etiquette, women, warmth, arrogance, honesty, conquest, bitterness, humiliation – words asserting their identity, refusing to come together and make sense.

Our game of Scrabble was to remain unfinished. It had become too internalised, I reflected as the letters rattled back into the box – some face up, some hiding their mystery. Misreading the signals – a painful self-reckoning.

Loss and desire merged when I kissed her goodbye, my lips scrambling across her face unfocused. This experience is yours for the keeping, she said. Make good use of it.

Rahila Gupta